

# Recognizing and Reporting Sexual Abuse and Assault

At least one in five girls and one in ten boys will be sexually abused at some point in their childhood.<sup>1</sup> People aged 15 to 24 report rape and sexual assault at far higher rates than any other age group.<sup>2</sup> If you suspect a student in your classroom has been or is being sexually abused, sexually exploited, or injured (by anyone, not just a caregiver) you are obligated to report it. Even if you have no suspicion, you should remember that you likely always have students who are currently experiencing sexual abuse or assault or who have in the past. Strive to create a classroom that is safe and inclusive, and in which good boundaries are modeled. You do not have to know for certain that a student has been abused to make a report and to offer the student support.

## HOW TO TELL if a student has been sexually abused or exploited

1. The student tells you (possibly following a lesson on sexual exploitation or sexual assault).
2. The student acts differently from usual, in troubled ways . . .
  - Regressing to more babyish behavior
  - Clinging to you or another staff person
  - Cranky, hostile or depressed
  - Sleeping in class, or lacking energy
  - Development of minor ailments (headaches, stomach aches, no appetite)
  - Reluctant to leave school at end of day
  - Dressing provocatively or wearing many layers of clothing even during hot weather

**These behaviors can signal other stresses, but it never hurts to ask if you can help with “a problem.”**

3. One student confides that another student was exploited.

## WHAT TO DO if a student confides in you about sexual abuse or assault or if you have “reasonable cause to believe”

If a student confides in you that she or he has been sexually exploited or if you have “reasonable cause to believe” that abuse or assault has occurred:

1. **Believe that student and say, “I believe you.”**
2. **Tell the student that they’re not to blame and say, “I care about you and I’m glad you told me.”**
3. **Speak privately with the student and maintain the student’s confidentiality** within the school, except if you feel the need to enlist the help of one other adult support person (your principal, school nurse, or whomever you trust the most).

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4. **REPORT THE ABUSE.** In all 50 states, **the law requires professional school personnel to report the suspected abuse** to either the police or to a child protection agency.<sup>3,4</sup> **It is not sufficient to “turn the case over” to your principal or anyone else, even if this is what your school protocol advises.** You are required by law to report it yourself or make certain it has been reported by another person (for example, by being in the room at the time). You do not need to know for certain that abuse has occurred to be obligated to report. All you need is *reasonable cause to believe* it has occurred; it is the job of the child protection agency to investigate, not yours.
5. **Offer the student as much control as possible** over the timing and manner of reporting. If he wishes, for example, he could make the report himself while you sat at his side for support. In Washington State, if a student isn't in immanent danger, you have 48 hours to make a report – so you could allow her the choice to delay reporting to a child protection agency for a day in order to disclose it first to a parent or guardian.<sup>5</sup>
6. If you need or want support or advice for yourself or the child in reporting the abuse, **seek professional help.**<sup>6</sup>

### **WHAT TO DO if you get an anonymous question from a student that indicates possible abuse or exploitation**

1. **If you recognize the handwriting,** ask that student if you can talk with them privately. Do not pressure them, but tell them that you care and that if there is anything they want help with, you can help. If the student denies writing the question, tell them that you care and want to help if they ever do need help in the future. Explain that, in the meantime, you do have to notify Child Protective Services that you received the question, even if you aren't sure who wrote it.
2. **If you don't recognize the handwriting,** call Child Protective Services for advice about whether to make a formal report.

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<sup>1</sup> Finkelhor, D., Dzuiba-Leatherman, J. (1994). Children as Victims of Violence: A National Survey. *Pediatrics*, 94:413-420.

<sup>2</sup> US Department of Justice. (1997, July). *Age Patterns of Victims of Serious Violent Crime*. Retrieved from <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/apvsvc.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> **In King County**, WA report concerns to Child Protective Services (1-800-609-8764 during business hours). **Anywhere in Washington State**, or after hours, or to report abuse of vulnerable adults 18+ call 1-866-221-4909. You can always call Law Enforcement (9-1-1) in an emergency.

<sup>4</sup> See **your state's** specific laws here: [www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws\\_policies/statutes/mandatall.pdf](http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/mandatall.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Child Protective Services, personal communication, January 19, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> **In King County**, WA, for support and advice, call King County Sexual Assault Resource Center (1-888-99-VOICE), Children's Response Center (425-688-5130) or Harborview Center for Sexual Assault & Traumatic Stress (206-744-1600; TDD: 206-744-1616). **Nationally**, call the National Sexual Assault Hotline: 1-800-656-HOPE.